May 18, 1991

Morgan Park Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Centennial Celebration

John M. Buchanan

I am delighted to be here. It is always a privilege to be a guest at someone else's family occasion, and Sue and I are honored to be with you and to be able to convey the very best wishes of the congregation of Fourth Presbyterian Church.

There are at least two very valuable current connections between Morgan Park Presbyterian Church and Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Johnny Tolbert (an Elder and leader in this congregation) is the Director of the Elam Davies Social Service Center and a valuable colleague and...

Jon Krogh, who worked at Fourth Presbyterian Church in a variety of ways as a student, directed the Tutoring Program, laid groundwork for expansion

of the concept - lots of affection for Jon and a continuing relationship of respect and mutuality. I'm glad he's here!

It is an important occasion, one hundred years - a big birthday.

Birthdays are fun in our household, a time for festivities and gifts and also a time always to tell the story. We're still doing it, telling each youngster how it was when they were born.

And part of what inevitably happens when you do that is that everybody begins to see the larger story, the story of a bigger extended family, of which this individual story is a part.

And that, as I understand my assignment, is what Jon wants me to do tonight. He was precise... well not exactly; his instructions ran to about four pages. But he was very precise about duration - speak about fifteen-twenty minutes.

So the larger story of which the story of the Morgan Park Presbyterian Church of Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A., in the 20th century, is a part.

Close your eyes.. and listen to these names: Abraham Lincoln, Grover Cleveland, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, William Jenning Bryan, Norman Thomas, John Foster Dulles; John Wanamaker, Andrew Mellon, George Westinghouse, Thomas Watson, Frederick Weyerhauser, Louis Severance, Cyrus and Nettie McCormick... McGuffey, whose readers define an era in education, Poet Marianne Moore, Karl Menninger, publishers Gilbert Hovey (National Geographic), Henry R. Luce (Time), DeWitt Wallace (Readers Digest); Justices William O. Douglas and Tom Clark; Generals Stonewall Jackson and George MacClellan; J. Howard Pew and John Glenn and Arnold Palmer and John Dancy and Mr. Rogers and Dean Rusk and Catherine Marshall and Orel Hershiser... all of them intentional Presbyterians, like salt of the earth, leaven in the loaf and on occasion, light in the darkness.

In May 21, 1789, thirty-four Presbyterians met in Philadelphia and decided that they were a national organization... the Presbyterian Church.

They represented 420 congregations scattered throughout the new nation and its frontier. Together they were the largest, best educated, most orderly church in the new world. They had a strong sense that they were a part of the new era in world history which was coming to pass with the birth of the American Republic, and so they dated the documents from that meeting, not May 1789, but "In the thirteenth year of the Independence of the United States of America." They had been there from the beginning. Two Presbyterian churches, established in 1640, were already nearly 150 years old in 1789.

Our story begins in the 16th Century when an exiled French lawyer, a partisan of the Reformation, stopped overnight in Geneva, Switzerland, and was persuaded to remain and reorganize the churches and the city. His name was John Calvin and his radical notion of church, state and the individual included the absolute sovereignty of God and therefore the limited

sovereignty of every other authority. Calvin said two things about the individual: one - we are sinners, against which no one has ever successfully argued, and second - that in spite of sin, the conscience of the individual is sacred. People need and should have rights - and also education. Finally, Calvin believed in the intersection of faith and life in the world, in the city streets, marketplace and body politic. Because he understood human nature so honestly, Calvin distrusted all authority and thought that the best guarantee against the abuse of authority was education and a political system of checks and balances.

One of his most ardent disciples was a Scotsman, John Knox, who took Calvin's ideas back to Edinburgh. And as Calvinists always do, he challenged the autocracy and the whole political establishment, including Mary Queen of Scots; and ultimately built those radical Presbyterian ideas into the soul of the nation and the Church of Scotland which is Presbyterian.

They came early to the New World... 1620. The Puritans were English Calvinists, dissenters from church and state. The Scots and Scotch-Irish from Northern Ireland came at the same time and established the Kirks on Long Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware. They brought with them their distrust of authority, but also their notion of God's sovereignty and individual rights, their commitment to education and their intention to put their religion to work in the public sphere, not simply in their sparse, lean and very cold churches. They were strong partisans of the American Revolution. They recognized the spirit of Calvin in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. Over in London the whole thing sounded like a Presbyterian rebellion... One of our ministers rushed into his church and ripped pages out of the hymnbooks to use as musket wadding and said "Give 'em Watts, boys," referring to Isaac Watts, hymnwriter.

The group that met in Phildelphia in 1789 understood that it was time to think anew. The presiding officer was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. To show his support of the order which was emerging, Witherspoon and several of the others had stopped wearing their wigs in 1776. Thirteen years earlier he had signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, just two blocks down the street, the only clergyman to do so.

Witherspoon preached the sermon, then presided as the Assembly elected one of its own as Moderator, John Rodgers. Historians sometimes like to note the similarities between Presbyterian Church structure and the Federal Government. In fact two years earlier, in the same city, meetings were held just two blocks apart in which the concepts were hammered out which resulted in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the structure of the National Presbyterian Church. The central issue for both groups was the matter of authority:

who gets it, how it is to be exercised and how limited or controlled. Both chose a strong central authority, but limited by checks and balances and local autonomy: neither a monarchy, king nor bishops, which they had enough of, nor a pure democracy - but something in between, a Republic.

And then the Presbyterians went to work. They appointed a few missionaries to organize churches on the frontier: they commissioned several representatives to open discussions with other Christian churches, they had a fierce argument about a hymnal, they discussed the schools and colleges they had founded and they composed a letter to the President of the United States, George Washington. Calvinists that they were, they presumed not only to speak to their congregations, they spoke for the church to the world, always very risky business. "We ought not to forget our consequence in the Republic," they said. It is one of our traditions.

Presbyterian values have been like seasoning in the larger context of American culture. We have never been as prominent numerically as we were in 1789, there are three million of us in 11,600 congregations, but we have always been a critical minority, a lively source of flavor for the rest of the culture: (the source of my concern!)

-Education, for instance. It had its source in our early notion that lay people should not have to depend on anyone to tell them what was in the Bible, so it was imperative that people read and understand. Calvinists dominated both private and public education, founding two-thirds of all the colleges and universities prior to the Civil War: Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, by New England Congregationalists, and by the Presbyterians themselves: Princeton, Lafayette, Hampden-Sydney, Washington and Lee, Stillman, Lewis and Clarke, Davidson, Maryville, Wooster, Lake Forest, Wabash, Hanover, Monmouth, Muskingum, Macalester... Many state universities were started by Presbyterians:

University of Delaware, University of Tennessee, Miami University, University of Michigan.

-**The deliberative process as a fairly dependable way to establish consensus and thereby the basis for responsible people to live together.** Presbyterian Ethicist, Don Shriver, said in a discussion of the abortion debate, and the other ethical dilemmas lurking in the near future such as genetic engineering, that we must recover the tradition of careful deliberation and compromise - instead of the currently fashionable approach of confrontation followed by shouting at one another through bull horns, utterly unwilling to grant that the other side's position may have some merit.

-**The intersection of religion and life, there from the beginning.** It is expressed in a centuries' old pattern of doing good in the world - which by some odd logic is spurned today so that "do-gooder" is a criticism rather than a compliment... Presbyterian hospitals, nursing homes, residences for the elderly, 28 Presbyterian

homes for children in trouble. We are "do-gooders."

-And of course, that matter of "God alone as Lord of the conscience";... It has often made us dissenters. Calvin and Knox were dissenters; they did not live easily with the establishment. One of our earliest preachers was thrown in jail for preaching in New York without a license and we've been doing it ever since. Elijah Parish Lovejoy was a Presbyterian editor of a St. Louis newspaper, burned out by a pro-slavery mob and later killed by another mob in Alton, Illinois for his anti-slavery editorializing. Henry Van Dyke risked his prestige and reputation by voicing a lonely protest against the Spanish-American War. Bill Coffin did the same during Viet Nam. No Presbyterian my age or older was not asked at least once during the sixties if he/she would ever engage in civil disobedience and often lost career opportunities, because in conscience no son or daughter of John Calvin can ever say "no" to that.

-And because we know about sin -- including our own - a long standing value has been toleration, openness. We are willing to admit our mistakes, a refusal to take ourselves too seriously, because we know in our hearts that God alone is sovereign. Even at our most belligerent we never claimed to be the only church, the only answer to the truth, or the only way to worship or express the faith.

I submit that the world needs those values which have been born and nurtured by the Presbyterian family.

We Presbyterians are down 25%, the United Church of Christ 20%, the Episcopalians 28%; even the Methodists are down 18%. Our best minds are exploring the change. The Lily Foundation is funding a major study of the decline of mainline religions.

We have lost members - a million in twenty years; but there are two facts about us which are important to acknowledge. The first is that since

1960 Presbyterians have not been having enough babies. Some of us have done our duty, but currently we aren't coming close to replenishing the supply of Presbyterians by birth, nor does it seem likely that we will or should. That isn't true for everyone in the Christian family. Not making new Presbyeterians, lowering the birth rate and limiting population is an honored Presbyterian value.

The other fact is that we are old. We've been around a long time. Our churches are old, in old neighborhoods. And that, by some ironic twist of logic, is not only not celebrated, but condemned as failure. There are many declining Presbyterian churches in urban areas. They have given their lives to the spiritual nurture of their neighborhoods which have changed very dramatically. They are still there, with declining numbers, aging congregation and leaking roofs. It is not fair to compare that church with Willow Creek.
That dear aging Presbyterian congregation

was there, faithfully caring for its members and its neighborhood, for decades; Presbyterian churches were there centuries before the new, fast-growing churches were even born and it is part of our values to remain there. The 80 aging parishioners in downtown are important. They are ours. They should have a church. So we will remain there and in the changing, declining neighborhoods, faithfully in ministry, creating programs to deal with a variety of human needs that simply don't exist anywhere else. And it will drain our resources to do it. May I suggest that instead of criticizing, instead of regarding declining urban neighborhood churches as failures, we should be cheering for them, thanking God for them, and regarding them as great successes - if the criteria of success is something other than big numbers, big budgets, big buildings.

May we be reminded of one of the most difficult lessons for anyone who loves this wonderful entrepreneurial culture of ours,

namely that the church of Jesus Christ is not called to be successful, but to be faithful, whether or not that means successful: may we be reminded that sometimes failing, by the culture's standards, means succeeding by our Lord's standards, that our Lord himself was crucified, not elected Chancellor of Jerusalem; that the whole point seems to be redemption through suffering, strength through weakness; and that when God's people start allowing the world to set the agenda and to define what success means we have fallen into a very serious trap of idolatry; for which the prophets of Israel had a very graphic description: "whoring after Babylon," they called it.

In the meantime it is tempting to look to the past only. Presbyterian journalist, Vic Jameson warns that, "It is safe to say that every generation since Adam has looked back wistfully at the good old days." [Presbyterian Survey, June 1988] The fifties, for instance, before Civil Rights and Angela Davis and

the turmoil and stress of the sixties. But God calls us to look ahead - not behind.

There is within the Gospel of Jesus Christ a permanent discomfort with the status quo, the establishment, the "tradition," even religious tradition. It is part of the genius of Presbyterianism, even while it is celebrating its own traditions, to know that, and therefore, to lean into the future with hope, which I propose should be the theme finally of this celebration - the future - the next century - the continuing story of the church God continues to write.

You have important work to do. You have a continuing witness to make about God's presence in the world simply by maintaining your church, keeping it up and alive and visible - a reminder every day of another kingdom.

You have important work to do in keeping alive notions which are not always popular, but are always critical to the life of society - notions of caring and compassion and justice.

We have a lot going for us... this big story of Presbyterianism which itself is one small part of a much larger story of God's people and their pilgrimage through history.

We have going for us those values handed down from one genertion to the next - education - tolerance - public responsibility.

And we have going for us the promise of God and be with us - to give you - you in this family of faith, in this time and this place - the resources you need to be faithful disciples in a faithful church.

Congratulations people of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church and God speed as you begin your second century.